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Cosima von Bonin

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Preface

Nicolaus Schafhausen

Encounters with Cosima von Bonin always entail a rendezvous of ambiguous dialogues. Besides various references to the art historical canon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we encounter in Von Bonin's work biomorphic signs of our ongoing mania for categorization. The ideals of conceptual art and its conversion into Pop – expressed foremost in the art and everyday culture of the North American West Coast – undergo a metamorphosis in Von Bonin's work in which insurmountable distance and absolute closeness, melancholia and the longing for euphoria reside at close quarters.

Von Bonin's work cannot be allocated to a classical art category. It combines a very precise handling of the sculptural tradition, a reference to familiar fables and the use of loaded materials, whose transformation causes a shift of meaning. Her works stand out not only for their emotional effect, but also due to the artist's manifest interest in (and appropriation of) the artistic production of others: artists, musicians and writers. Equally important are her close relationships with the places where she shows her work.

Since her first solo show in 1990 in the newly founded Galerie Christian Nagel in Cologne or in her first institutional show *Hast du heute Zeit? – Ich aber nicht* (*Are you free today? – I am not*), together with Kai Althoff in the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart in 1995 – which was one of the first institutional exhibitions I curated – her aim has been to elicit via her works an experience of the invisible through the visible. Yesterday, today and the ideal non-time and non-space of utopia are never far away.

The title of her exhibition at Witte de With, COSIMA VON BONIN'S FAR NIENTE FOR WITTE DE WITH'S SLOTH SECTION, LOOP # 01 OF THE LAZY SUSAN SERIES, A ROTATING EXHIBITION 2010 – 2011, consciously functions on different levels. On the one hand, she concretely names the context of the institution; yet, on the other hand, she chooses the strategy of the conceptual as a metaphor. "Il dolce far niente," the sweetness of doing nothing is simultaneously a desire and a current state. What arises from our wish to do nothing not only evokes a whole field of signs, but also a field of time: of just being, in the here and now, of a slow disappearance, of our own explosive presence. The imaginary potential contained in Von Bonin's objects are suddenly released; their eroticizing energy unleashed from any functional constraints. We can sense the mood that Von Bonin's objects are in, their impulse to push our thinking off the beaten track. We can also feel the slight melancholia that arises when the subversion of meaning comes to light.

This Source Book provides an associative approach to the work of Cosima von Bonin. I would like to thank all the authors for their contributions to this publication. Furthermore I thank the designers Kummer & Herrman and the team of Witte de With as well as the patrons of this show, foremost Cees and Inge de Bruin-Heijn. My special thanks go to Zoë Gray for her personal commitment; she co-curated this project with me, and without her it would been impossible to realize either the show or the book. Finally, my utmost thanks to Cosima von Bonin for the inspiring collaboration.

Introduction: Delicious Diligent Indolence

Zoë Gray

DESPERATELY SEEKING LAZY SUSAN
Who is Cosima von Bonin, this woman behind the intriguing moniker? Born in Mombasa, rooted in Cologne. Fiendishly shy of any press attention, yet highly personable. Forthright yet flexible, Von Bonin is always occupying two positions at once. A true ventriloquist, she employs a sequence of displacements that attempt to remove her from the spotlight by pointing our attention elsewhere. Diversionary tactics abound, as she kicks against our desire to know the "real artist" behind the work. Peel off the layers of disguise and what do you find at the heart of the conundrum? An oversized soft chick, snoozing astride a vomit-splattered rocket.

Her work is equally ambiguous, for all its direct appeal. Despite – or perhaps due to – its very material nature, its meaning slips through your grasp, or flutters temptingly on the horizon, then vanishes, leaving nothing but the faint echo of a knowing chuckle. If you don't befriend this cheeky sprite of a meaning, it will make you feel excluded, dull-witted. But if you follow its merry dance, adopt its laid back, West Coast attitude (present even in the grayness of Cologne, or in no-nonsense Rotterdam), it will delight, inspire, confuse and calm in equal measure. Von Bonin doesn't want to bug you, but she's not shy of a little niggle or two.

Her practice certainly stretches the curator or art critic who wishes to explain her work, or assign labels to her, for she is at once like so many artists and unlike any. One way to proceed – without seeking to pin Von Bonin down under the needle of definition – is by means of comparison and elimination. First, there is the web of association, influence and reaction that connects her to the Cologne and Düsseldorf art scenes. Her stretched "canvases" (which she calls, with typical self-deprecation, "rags") formally echo the sewn monochromes of Blinky Palermo from the late 1960s, and build upon his early challenge to the macho conventions of abstract painting. However, they exude a silliness and a flippancy largely absent from his oeuvre. Her use of fabrics and the feminist subtext in her work evoke Rosemarie Trockel, a decade her senior. There is a nod to the late Sigmar Polke in the way that Von Bonin embeds satirical references to consumer society into her canvases. Like Polke, she combines disparate fragments into one image, although without his hallucinatory layering effect. And mention must be made of Martin Kippenberger whom she cites directly, for example with MK2 FORMULA (ART & IDEAS), 2010, an *homage* to his untitled streetlamp works from 1989 – 1991. Writing of Kippenberger's 1987 *Peter* sculptures, George Baker describes the many sculptural problems that they tackle, with a plethora of terms that could equally be applied to Von Bonin's work: "the war between body and commodity as a model for the medium; or the visual versus tactile, color versus structure; or seriality versus randomness; design object versus language; functional object versus dysfunctional image; support structure versus container; [...] pedestal piece versus environmental surround; floor piece versus all. Surrealism abuts constructivism; assemblage takes on minimalism."[1] Yet, despite the similarities, Von Bonin is none of the above artists.

Initial appearances and common materials not withstanding, the oft-made association between Von Bonin and Annette Messager is misleading. They do share a fascination with multiplicity and have both created works that feature tricksters and Pinocchios.[2] However, Messager's work has a *tristesse* and a morbidity that never breaks surface in Von Bonin's. Comparison with a more immediate contemporary, Rita McBride, offers perhaps more helpful insight. Both she and Von Bonin avoid a single style or medium, and combine personal and universal references in their work. They both play with the comedic possibilities of language, titling their works and exhibitions with evident wit and pleasure.[3] Writing of McBride, Dieter Schwarz states: "The objects in her exhibitions have a visual and material quality, they represent an intelligence (the word 'concept' seems so inappropriate). Consequently it makes no sense to devise an abstract argument or to try to seek out some master plan, for there is none."[4] The same could be said of Bonin's enigmatic practice. Their shared approach is one of irony, but as Schwarz continues, "irony is neither about distancing the work from a particular source, nor is it derisive or critical. It refers, in the Romantic sense, to a form of representation in which it is not possible to identify the maker's position with regard to their source."[5] Ironic yet never cynical, Von Bonin eschews dogma at all costs.

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[1] George Baker, "Out of Position," in *Artforum*, 67, no. 6 (February 2009): 150.

[2] For example, Messager's *Casino* installation for the French Pavilion, Biennale di Venezia, 2005.

If we wanted to contextualize Von Bonin within a particular movement – something she will feistily resist, but which my curatorial nature compels me to attempt nonetheless – I would include her within the loose group of artists that Nicolas Bourriaud has labeled "postproduction."[6] For Bourriaud, this generation "intermingles conceptual art and pop art, Anti-form and Junk art, as well as certain procedures established by design, cinema, economy and industry."[7] He writes: "Notions of originality (being the origin of) and even of creation (making something from nothing) are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, both of whom have the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts."[8] Since the early days of her practice, Von Bonin has adopted a free-electron way of working, collaborating with musicians, writers, performers, or other artists as her projects dictate. She has an ever-growing circle of collaborators, or – as she dubs them – slaves (and insists that this slavery is always reciprocal). For Witte de With, she collaborated with electronic music producer Moritz von Oswald to compose soundtracks to accompany several new pieces. Their languorous and hypnotic beats simultaneously enhance and complicate the visitors' experience of the works on display. They produced a dub plate together, and at the opening Von Oswald performed a live set featuring vocalist Tikiman, followed by a DJ set from Big City Sound Girl. These actions – far from being accessories to the exhibition – are essential features of Von Bonin's practice.

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[3] e.g. McBride's exhibitions *Mae West and the Middle Managers* (Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich, 2004); *The Donkey's Way & Piggybackback* (Galeria Pedro Oliveira, Porto, 1997); or *The Fat Man, The Spine, The Spineless and Thin Corners* (Michael Klein Gallery, New York, 1992).

[4] Dieter Schwarz, "Here, There, and Everywhere," in *Previously* (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2010), 17.

[5] Ibid., 23.

[6] Bertrand Lavier, Philippe Parreno, John Armleder, Liam Gillick, Angela Bulloch, Douglas Gordon, among others.

[7] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, (Berlin: Lukas&Sternberg, 2002), 70.

[8] Ibid., 13.

Similarly, she invited artist Frances Scholz to show the teaser for her new film, *Starlite*, which features many of her usual collaborators, was shot in Cologne and produced by Von Bonin. It is a rollicking tale based on the ongoing fantasy story *Episodes of Starlite* by Mark von Schlegell, episode two of which appears in this book. The sexually charged tale of a female warrior – the eponymous Starlite – amidst a horde of battle-hungry men bears, at first glance, little resemblance to the works of Von Bonin, but as with the films of George A. Romero and Jacques Tati incorporated into the show, it contains certain themes that resurface within Von Bonin's practice: a fascination with ghosts, spirits and the "living dead;" a critical take on consumer society, through the irreverent deployment of luxury fashion goods; and sympathy for the underdog (or, in this case, the underduck).

Von Bonin's cast of characters is largely peopled – so to speak - by animals. She draws upon the long tradition of anthropomorphized animals that can be traced back through art and literature, from medieval fables to the animated cartoons of Disney. This aspect of her work is highlighted by two of the texts in this book: in the conversation between the artist and Daffy Duck scripted by Dirk von Lowtzow (one of her long-term slaves) in which they discuss Kneipp cures, hunting and the vagaries of room service; and in the essay by Mami Kataoka that looks at the tradition in Japanese folklore of using animals and spirits as tricksters to disturb the rational status quo of society. At the exhibition opening, drag performer extraordinaire produzentin fulfilled a similar role, causing mild chaos and acting as one of the aforementioned diversionary tactics (the artist herself arrived incognito and left soon afterwards).

LAZINESS, SLOTH & FATIGUE

This book accompanies the first "loop" of THE LAZY SUSAN SERIES, A ROTATING EXHIBITION. The Lazy Susan is a tabletop domestic appliance, personified with a woman's name, used to serve an array of dishes. The idea of a rotating exhibition differs from a traditional traveling show in that, with each rotation or loop, visitors are served a slightly different dish.[9] The title of LOOP # 01 – COSIMA VON BONIN'S FAR NIENTE FOR WITTE DE WITH'S SLOTH SECTION – sets the tone and was derived from the Sloth Section created by *Cabinet* magazine. It seemed fitting to reproduce *Cabinet*'s Sloth Section here. Not only does its theme echo Von Bonin's own, but the erudite writing is a perfect fit for her witty work. The idea of re-using existing texts also seemed appropriately editorially slothful.

The word at the heart of this exhibition – *sloth* – is a misleading one. Taken now to mean mere laziness, sloth has a more complex origin. In the Middle Ages, it was labeled by the Church as one of the seven deadly sins, and included elements of restlessness, verbosity and unregulated curiosity. One beautiful oxymoron used to describe sloth in the eighteenth century was "busy idleness" and moralizing tales were written to dissuade people from trying to pursue too many ideas at once.[10] Sloth implied a willfulness and impatience often tied to a lack of perseverance, misplaced enthusiasm and a roving attention that rendered all efforts idle. It is therefore a provocative theme for an artist to choose, especially in these times when we are increasingly told that art is just a "left-wing hobby." Is her exhibition title simply the expression of a personal and deep-seated desire to hide on an Italian island and do nothing? Or is it Von Bonin's way of reflecting upon the rhythms of production and presentation, preparation, preparation, preparation that the art market demands? As Oscar Wilde noted: "[What art] seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine."[11]

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[9] The other "loops" of THE LAZY SUSAN SERIES: Arnolfini (Bristol), MAMCO (Geneva) and Museum Ludwig (Cologne).

[10] Daniel Rosenberg, "The Young and the Restless," see p.79, 83.

[11] Oscar Wilde, cited in Tom Hodgkinson, *How to be Idle*, (London: Penguin, 2005), 32.

Today, in our culture of consumption, work and organized leisure, when you ask people how they are, the reply often tends to be "exhausted". In her essay reproduced here, Marina van Zuylen notes the moral distinction made between being exhausted and the more bohemian *fatigued*: "Being exhausted signifies having paid one's dues to society. Fatigue, on the other hand, generally connotes a weakened state, a deviation from the affirming inevitability of cause and effect, work and repose."[12] Von Bonin's animals are clearly fatigued. They snooze before our very eyes. In scientific terms, they might be described as "hypnagogic," languishing in that liminal state between sleep and wakefulness in which the brain is free to dream up new ideas. As G.K. Chesterton – another fatigued writer – put it: "Lying in bed would be an altogether perfect experience if only one had a colored pencil long enough to draw on the ceiling."[13]

THE ILLICIT PLEASURES OF THE IDLER

Over the course of 2010, Von Bonin has created several Pinocchio-like characters that she labels Idlers, rebellious through their inactivity, who place themselves center-stage and stubbornly refuse to perform. One features in THE IDLER'S PLAYGROUND, a public sculpture recently installed in Rotterdam.[14] Another – IDDLER, LEZZER, TOSSPIECE – sits inside Witte de With, his nose snaking through the gallery. A third, TAGEDIEB, sits on the main shopping street of Vienna. Is it merely coincidence that this porky-telling prankster happens to be sitting in front of a bank?

Pierre Saint-Amand – interviewed in this book – has written on the obsession with work and productivity that began in Europe with the Enlightenment and the emergence of the capitalist economic system. Of particular interest to him is the moment when idleness shifted from being an aristocratic prerogative to a figure of bourgeois resistance. He cites the ambiguous position adopted by Denis Diderot towards the figure of the idler, whom he depicted in certain texts as a parasite, while simultaneously portraying him as "a hero of non-production."[15]

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[12] Marina van Zuylen, "Fatigued," see p.98.

[13] G. K. Chesterton, "On Lying in Bed," 1909, n.p.

[14] A commission by Sculpture International Rotterdam, for the Coolsingel/Hofplein.

[15] Pierre Saint-Amand, see p.110.

The celebration of idleness has a long history in art and literature, and an excellent compendium of its champions is Tom Hodgkinson's book *How to be Idle*. "Idleness as a waste of time is a damaging notion put about by its spiritually vacant enemies," writes Hodgkinson. "The fact that idling can be enormously productive is repressed. Musicians are characterized as slackers; writers as selfish ingrates; artists as dangerous. [...] Long periods of languor, indolence and staring at the ceiling are needed by any creative person in order to develop ideas."[16] The prejudice against the idle is well established in the Western world. Hodgkinson continues: "Governments do not like the idle. The idle worry them. They do not manufacture useless objects and they do not consume the useless products of labor. They cannot be monitored. They are *out of control*."[17] Equally nonconformist are smokers, those people who relish an idle moment with their nicotine fix. For Von Bonin, smoking has become a rebellious act in this health-conscious era of non-smoking bars. Her SMOKE neons act as a call to the illicit pleasures of smoking, their rather retro style evoking an earlier epoch where smoking was not only socially acceptable, but brought with it a whiff of glamour. As the Pink Martinis sang in their Apollinaire-inspired ditty "Sympathique" (1997): *Je ne veux pas travailler / Je ne veux pas déjeuner / Je veux seulement oublier / Et puis je fume.*

The Romantic poet John Keats was highly sensitive to the paradoxical pleasures of productive inactivity, which he described as "delicious diligent indolence." In a letter to a friend, he mused: "Now it is more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like Mercury – let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive".[18] I can think of no better advice to give a visitor to Cosima von Bonin's exhibition, or to offer you, dear reader, as you embark upon this book.

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[16] Tom Hodgkinson, *How to be Idle*, (London: Penguin, 2005), 33.

[17] Ibid., 34.

[18] John Keats, in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, February 19th, 1818, cited in *How to be Idle*, ibid., 37.

Up a chic creek: A conversation between Daffy Duck and Cosima von Bonin

Dirk von Lowtzow

Daffy Duck: When I woke up with a start at five o'clock this morning, well it may have been five fifteen, this happens to me maybe once or twice a month, waking up with a sudden start from the very depths of a dream, I don't mean a nightmare that's so dreadful you simply have to wake up with a start, no, a deep sleep, the kind they call dreamless, so anyway when I awoke first thing this morning I had this tremendous urge to go out into my garden and have a cigarette. Not that I'm addicted to nicotine, you understand, I'm more of what you'd call a *fumeur social*. But be that as it may, all of a sudden at five o'clock or five fifteen this morning I felt this weird need to have a cigarette, so I slipped out into the garden, past the baby tits which I hoped were snoozing away peacefully in the aviary, and took a cigarette from the packet I keep ready for just such occasions, then lit it and smoked it, inhaling deeply. So there I was in my garden, peering up at the tall treetops, and I could see dawn slowly breaking through what was now, in the merry month of May, their toxic green foliage. The street was still sleeping, and just for a moment it was perfect. As for why I'm telling you all this, Ms. Von Bonin, I haven't the foggiest. There are times when I just talk my beak off – whatever pops into my head, usually after a slight twitch in my rear end. But all this is by the by. A-hunting we will go!

Cosima von Bonin: Hunting? I thought we were going for a Kneipp cure. I've already turned up my trouser legs so I can step into a cold pool right up to my calves, and now here you are going on about hunting. Oh, and as for those baby tits, to a tittery they will go! Otherwise I'll be having even more sleepless nights than I'm having already.

Daffy Duck: Thank you, but my little aviary is perfectly adequate. No offence, Your Highness, but here in Berchtesgaden, here at our sanatorium, we have rather different ideas about leisure pursuits. I *am* Veit Harlan's great-grandson, after all. We do quite enough Kneipp cures as it is – more than enough, if the truth be known. Being a drake, I'm not afraid of water, but – well, shotguns are more my thing. But it's time for our conversation…

Cosima von Bonin: …you know, sometimes I feel so terribly tired. I could build a kingdom of tiredness – a veritable empire! You simply can't imagine, good Master Drake! My bed is my citadel, my pillow is my crown. A mere illusion – I mean, it's as clear as all get-out. And yet… tired, tired and tired again. Just as well I've got my slaves. Having to do everything for yourself – the very idea!

Daffy Duck: Egad, Madame! Your glorification of slave-owning society doth make my sable plumage stand on end. With fury. *(snorting)* So get a grip on yourself, or duck! Anyway, there I was in my garden, in the middle of the night, the early dawn, smoking away. Or rather, smoking a chain. To be sure, being of a nervous disposition, I was assailed by a bout of profound unease. I don't need to tell you the list of bouts is endless. In fact I was feeling very agitated, for I had been told a while before to engage in dialogue with you, and of course the very idea was appalling. As a rule, I don't do dialogue – my own quacking more than suffices me. That's another reason why I love hunting, even though, let me say in passing, I have all too often been the quarry. Many a time I have stood face to face with the Grim Reaper, but by some miracle I have always managed not to get reaped. And yet, and yet… I can spend whole weeks in my hunting lodge, in total seclusion, just me and my self-quackery. Such bliss! But now we are so deep in conversation, I've been wanting to ask how your cousin Behemoth is getting on.

Cosima von Bonin: Muddling along, the old motherfucker. I don't need to tell you, preparation's the name of the game. Preparation! Preparation! Preparation!

Daffy Duck: Give me procrastination any time. The last thing I need is to be prepared. I'm not a lame duck, or a cold duck, let alone a prepared duck. But as for you – my God, you're so monosyllabic! I can't stand it. I'm going to call room service – I badly need a club sandwich. I have to give my throat a good rub-down, for I produce quite inordinate quantities of spit.
(picking up the telephone and speaking into it)
Hallo? Dogsbody? Janitor? Why on earth does no-one answer?
(covering the receiver with a wing)
Quite disgraceful! Hallo! Porter! Ah, at last, I've been bellowing down the receiver for simply hours. Now listen, dear fellow, I need a club sandwich, and make it snappy. Excuse me? Come down to the kitchen and make one myself? The nerve of the man! Did you ever hear the like? I'll manage without.
(to Cosima von Bonin)
Always trouble with the staff in this dump. My apologies… Now where was I?

Cosima von Bonin: *(yawning pointedly)* You keep trying to engage in dialogue with me, even though you have already made it plain that you do not think dialogically, which I in turn can assure you is not necessary. There is no need to engage in dialogue, least of all with me. There is far too much dialogue as it is. People are constantly engaging in dialogue, with young artists who can't be helped anyway and old artists who are beyond helping. It's a scandal. So why don't you just shut your beak, you silly goose?

Daffy Duck: Goose? Did you say "goose"? *Ma chère*, I don't rile easily, but there *are* limits. Are you trying to insult me? Remember you are talking to a drake. What's more, I am a journalist. Here's my press card. You're welcome to verify its authenticity.

Cosima von Bonin: Authenticity – all I ever hear is authenticity. Wherever you go, you get authenticity. My God, is there no escape? They do it even in the best hotels. You walk into the foyer, all unsuspecting, and the next thing you know it's authenticity, left, right and center. It makes you want to puke. In fact, I feel like puking right now. All over your Pucci dress. What are you flapping around here in a Pucci dress for, anyway? I think I must be going mad. I need my salt sticks, or at least a Librium. Could someone ring for a Coca-Cola? In any case, *Monsieur le Canard*, I hate to say this, but right here and right now you're way up the creek. A chic creek, but a creek nonetheless. Up a chic creek. Whatever you do, don't take that personally.

Daffy Duck: Hah! Thought as much. Set up by that bastard of an editor-in-chief. Editors really are the lowest of the low. And I'm just a daffy drake … er, reporter … er, I think I'm losing my mind as well. Please forgive the *malentendu*, Madame. You're perfectly right. Don't let me upset you any longer…

Cosima von Bonin: *(shouting and waving her arms)* But I don't want to upset you either. Why can't you see that? I don't want to upset anyone – anyone or anything. I simply want to sit. Sit! Sit! Sit!

Daffy Duck: Please stop waving like that. I shall get me hence, back to my garden, back to the baby tits.

Cosima von Bonin: Tit-ter-y!
(Exeunt)

A suivre

Animal – Human – Animal

Mami Kataoka

Communication between people and animals is a common trope in folklore and legend, where the two are often seen to coexist naturally. Animals frequently play a key role in the stories' development. Sometimes they are humans who have been transformed into animals under some magic spell, but they might equally be animals with human characteristics used to symbolize some aspect of the human world, or tricksters who delight in deceiving the gullible. Western fairy tales include several examples of marriage between human and human-turned-animal by enchantment, like the handsome prince turned into a frog or the tale of Beauty and the Beast. Japanese folk tales, too, contain many instances of humans talking freely with animals. *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* ("The crane returns a favor") is the story of a crane that turns into a young woman and weaves valuable cloth to provide income for an old woodcutter who previously took pity on her and saved her life. The story of *Momotaro* ("The Peach Boy") tells of a boy born from a huge peach drifting along a river, who discovers his strength and sets out with a dog, a pheasant and a monkey to do battle with the world of demons.

In Japanese folklore, monkeys are nearly always characterized as sly, deliberately tricking people and other animals in order to harm them in some way. In the epic Chinese tale of the Monkey King ("Journey to the West"), a monkey called Sun Wukong, ordered by the gods to guard the peach tree whose fruit gave them eternal life, steals and eats some of the fruit and is banished to undertake the long trek to India to bring back the sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism, facing eighty ordeals along the way before he can be rehabilitated. Since they are the closest of all the animals to humans, the mischievous monkey characters can be seen to express the lust for power and possessions lurking deep in our own psyche.

In his writing about animals, Japanese critic Hiroki Azuma noted that in his classification of postmodern societies, French philosopher Alexandre Kojève points to the increasingly animal-like nature of our dealings with each other. Kojève describes the United States as a society that has become animal-like (while Japan is a society cloaked in snobbishness). He considers its consumer society – in which the market meets the requirements of consumers, and fashion is determined mainly by the requirements of the media – to be animalistic in terms of the differentiation he draws between needs and desires, which he claims distinguish humans from animals. A need, Kojève states, has a specific object and is a craving that can be satisfied by the obtention of that object. Desires, on the other hand, are generated by comparison with others, so even when they are entirely fulfilled in accordance with a person's initial wishes, they never truly go away. In other words, animal needs can be sated without reference to any other being, while human desires are fundamentally dependent on others. With this premise in mind, Azuma comments: "In modern consumer society, where lifestyle is dictated by manuals and media, distribution management has become so thorough that the instant and mechanized meeting of consumer demand is being further advanced every day, reducing the involvement of other people as much as possible. Thus objects that were previously impossible to obtain without some degree of social communication, such as our daily food needs or even sexual partners, are now available extremely simply and easily from the fast food and sex industries without any inconvenient communication."[1]

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[1] Hiroki Azuma, "Detabesu-teki dobutsu (Animals like databases)," in *Dobutsu-ka suru posuto-modan – otaku kara miru Nihon shakai* (Postmodern animalization – Japanese society as seen from the otaku), (Tokyo: Kodansha Gendai Shinsho, 2001), 127-128.

For that reason, he claims, our societies are proceeding down "the path of animalization."[2]

This path of animalization – and its relationship to our consumer society – is embodied in many works by Cosima von Bonin. Her larger than life domestic animals such as dogs and rabbits, or the sea creatures including clams, crabs and octopuses, seem to have escaped from a cartoon universe. Even Walt Disney's Daffy Duck and Mickey Mouse make an appearance in her work, their supposed innocence somehow unsettling when shown in the context of the contemporary art gallery. Among the broad cast of Von Bonin's anthropomorphic animals, the octopus is a recurring character. STRUKTUR (2007) and DECOY (DER KRAKE # 3) (2007) are both made from the colorful flags that Japanese fishing boats fly on their return to port whenever they have a big catch.[3] "Krake" means "octopus" in German, but also evokes the mythical sea monster the Kraken, who lived in the depths and occasionally surfaced to attack ships. Von Bonin's use of this fabric combined with this title therefore evokes a moment that is both festive and disastrous, inhabiting two positions at once. According to Lewis Hyde in his book *Trickster Makes the World – Mischief, Myth, and Art*, in Greek tradition the creature "most renowned for its wily skin is the octopus," as for the Greeks its "skin-shifting versatility was a virtue."[4] By transforming its appearance, like the camouflage of some other animals and insects, the octopus was something of a trickster that could cause disorientation.

The trickster is a recurrent figure in traditional stories in both East and West, a character who plays mischief on others and injects chaos into the situation. Tricksters are not always entirely negative beings. For example, the coyote, who is the archetypical trickster of the folklore of Native Americans, often comes bearing some sort of

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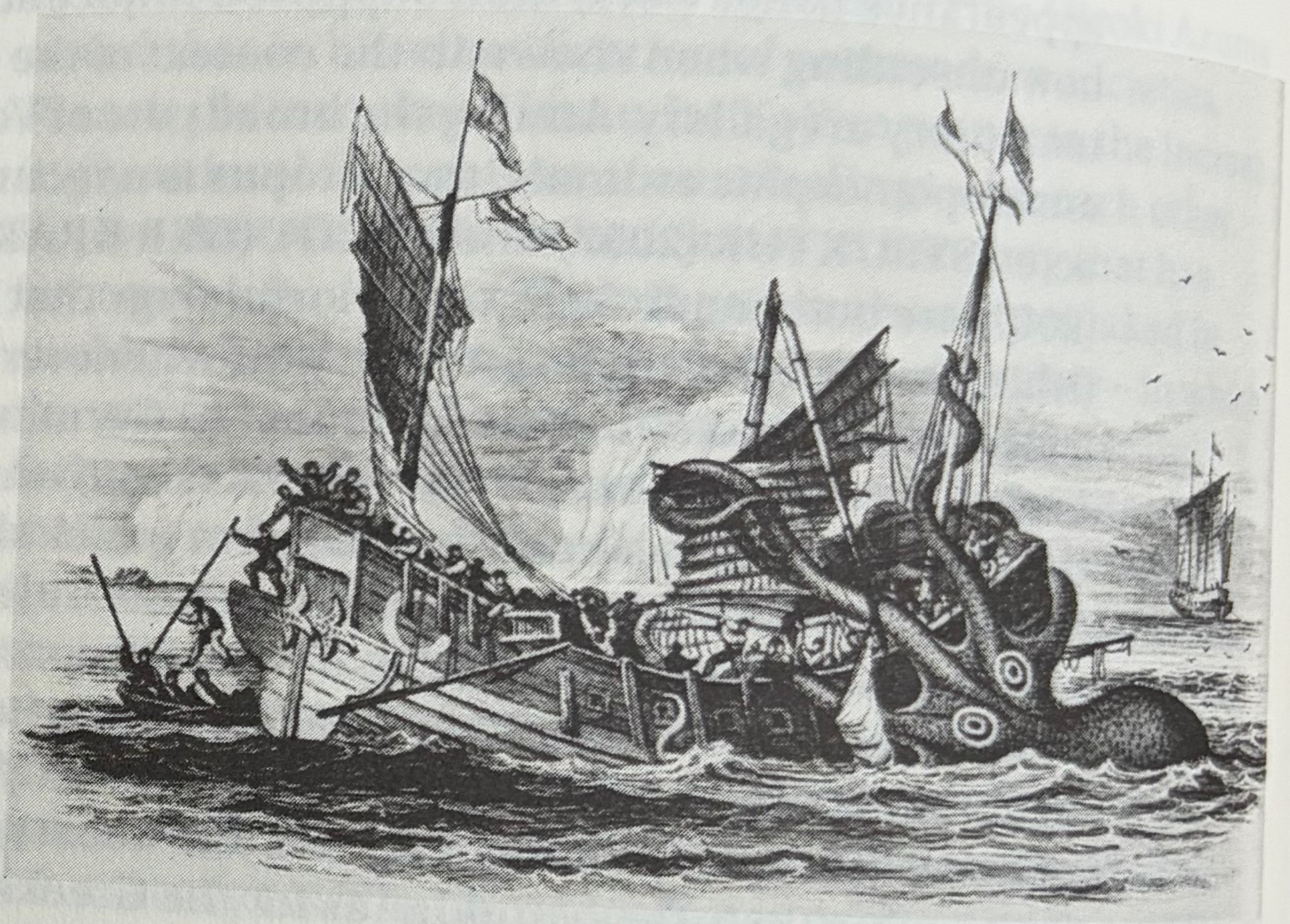
[2] Ibid.

[3] Von Bonin's other octopus works are SEASONS IN THE ABYSS (2006) and LE PRIMITIF DU FUTUR (2008). A fifth octopus has been made for the Witte de With exhibition. See p.71.

[4] Lewis Hyde, "That's my way, Coyote, not your way," in *Trickster Makes This World – Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 52.



Pierre Denys de Montfort,
The Legend of The Kraken, 1810.
According to sailors' reports, Kraken were creatures of enormous size, who would attack a ship, wrap their arms around the hull and capsize it.

The legendary Kraken is probably what we know today as the giant squid. This image was based on a creature that French sailors reported to have attacked their ship off the coast of Angola.

spiritual message.[5] Hyde writes, “One reason native observers may have chosen coyote the animal to be Coyote the Trickster is that the former in fact does exhibit a great plasticity of behavior and is, therefore, a consummate survivor in a shifting world.”[6] One cultural role that these tricksters fulfill is the work of conjugation that links the diverse phenomenon in the world, the “real world” from the “spirit world,” for example. As Hyde explains, tricksters are particularly fond of the “flexible or movable joint”, and that tricksters are themselves simultaneously “joint-disturbers”.[7] However, they do not only cause disruption. Their function is separation and re-articulation, the redefining of the overall systemic structure of the world through a process of reconnecting its many separate parts. Tricksters dart around freely between differing structures and scales, beyond the constraints of space and time, helping to maintain the continuity of the relationships between them. In his book *Mukashi-banashi no shinso* (“The Profundity of Folk Tales”), psychologist Hayao Kawai observes that these characters have a dual significance: “At the lower level tricksters are mere destroyers who enjoy taunting others, but their function at the higher level can be quite heroic, bringing new order and a constructive influence.”[8] They are beings capable of two contradictory characteristics at the same time: good and evil, order and chaos, destruction and construction. In this way they can be clownish creatures that bring a breath of fresh air to stagnant human society.

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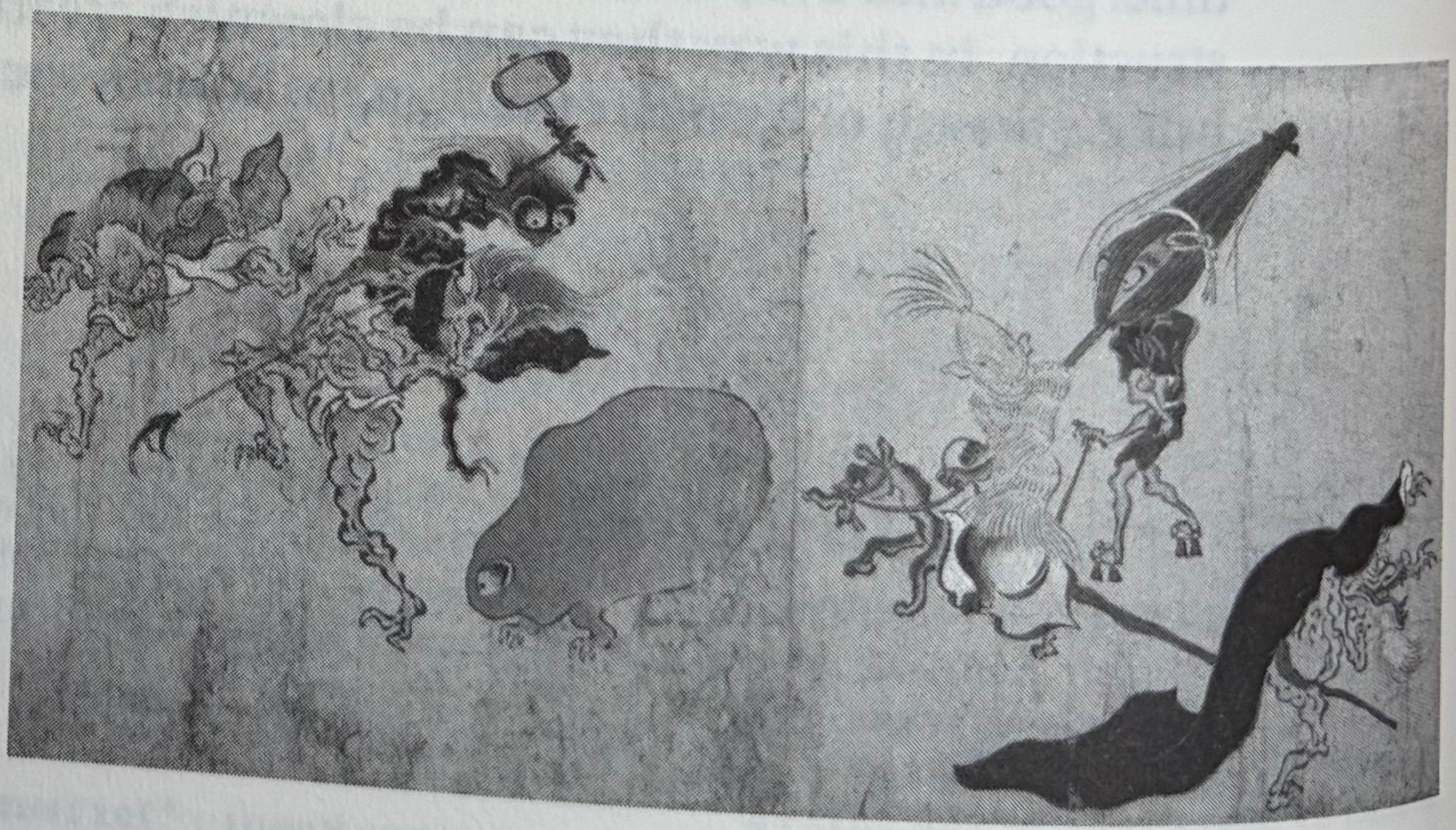
[5] In light of this tradition, what should we make of Joseph Beuys’ performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974)? Upon arrival in New York, he draped a felt blanket over his head in order to avoid seeing any scenes of daily life in the United States. Instead, he spent eight hours a day for three days locked up with a coyote before returning to Germany. The year was 1974, during the Vietnam War. Was this Beuys’ adoption of a political stance about that conflict when he chose the animal that the indigenous people of the country had long considered a trickster?

[6] Lewis Hyde, “That’s my way, Coyote, not your way,” in *Trickster Makes This World - Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 43.

[7] Ibid., 256.

[8] Hayao Kawai, “Torikusutaa no Hataraki (The workings of trickster),” in *Mukashi-banashi no shinsou* (The Profundity of Folk Tales), (Tokyo: Fukuinkan Shoten Publishers, 1977), 145 - 146.

This duality and ambiguity in the character of tricksters, as well as the transformations between human and non-human reminds us of the story of Pinocchio, the mischievous wooden puppet in the famous children's story that emerged in Italy in the nineteenth century. Pinocchio's nose grows longer every time he tells a lie, to emphasize the ever-increasing risk that confronts him as he ventures deeper and deeper into falsehood. And yet he ends up receiving a real heart and turning into a real boy. As both puppet and boy, as non-living and living being, Pinocchio displays a dichotomy that points out the dual meaning of such values as truth and deceit. Several of Cosima von Bonin's recent works include a small person with an extremely long nose. In TAGEDIEB (2010), produced for a newly launched public art project in Vienna, the figure sits high above the passers-by in an umpire's high chair, a spider dangling from his nose to suggest just how long he has been lying. In a new version of the work, THE IDLER'S PLAYGROUND (2010), installed on Rotterdam's Hofplein, the character's nose is even longer, extending across a path and piercing a giant mushroom. The contradictory playfulness of this morose-looking figure is highlighted by his placement within a bright green playground.



Tsukumogami (artifact spirits) from the *Hyakki-Yagyō-Emaki* (the picture scroll of the demons' night parade), Muromachi Period (late 14th to 16th Century), Shinjuan, Daitoku-ji Temple, Kyoto.

The symbolic role of the trickster is reminiscent of that of the *yokai*, eerie beings in Japanese tradition which include ghosts like those of Western folklore, but also goblins and other strange entities. And while they do sometimes do bad things to people, some are quite harmless. Invisible, they are believed to exist peacefully alongside us. Their origins lie deep in the history of nature worship, animism and shamanism. People were sensitive to climatic variations and the changing of seasons, and this made them in awe of the power of nature, which to them had inestimable potential. This, it could be said, led to an awareness of various spiritual beings that emerged in folklore in the form of *yokai*, usually with some recognizably human characteristics. Moreover, as some folklorists suggest, these *yokai* can be considered as the roots and origins of contemporary animation and manga character culture or *kawaii* culture in Japan[9]. Known for his manga featuring *yokai*, Shigeru Mizuki has also complied a book *Nihon yokai taizen* ("Compendium of Japanese yokai"), in which he describes more than 400 different types. In Japanese art history they also feature prominently and can be found in many scrolls from medieval times, often depicting the night parades in which *yokai* were believed to participate regularly. In a function somewhat similar to that of the tricksters, *yokai* are capable of traveling freely between the world of humans and other worlds, and they are said to have an ability to make visible to us those realms that are normally beyond our senses.

The role of contemporary art in society has something in common with that of the tricksters and *yokai* described above. It inclines us toward doubt whenever we begin to have faith in established certainties. By pulling those certainties apart and forcing us to find some way.of putting them back together again, it shines a light on the things of which we have lost sight, or perhaps on the long history of humanity, especially those aspects of it that have been forgotten during the process of modernization. By bringing these things back into our vision, it offers us new opportunities to think about what is truth.

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[9] Editor's note: Since the 1970s, cuteness, in Japanese *kawaii* (literally, "loveable," "cute" or "adorable") has become a prominent aspect of Japanese popular culture, entertainment, clothing, food, toys and mannerisms. See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuteness_in_Japanese_culture

Episodes of Starlite: Episode the Second, "Little Hood Mountain"

Mark von Schlegell

King Fhyrr LXIII of Mir's Delta, Lord of Swamp and Xavern, reclined naked in a bubbling pool of fragrant water atop Little Hood Mountain. He looked North, towards the vast and fertile steppes that stretched all the way to the Iron Gates of Aiirste. The gray billowing smoke that curled off the summit of the conical hill this dusk cast a sacrilegious gloom on the spectacle below. Camped in their thousands, the various sellswords serving King Fhyrr lit the plains before him with fires as seemingly numerous as the mirrors in the sky. More numerous, in fact, as Mir's Mirrors were now obscured by the black smoke of Grynthe's Unx works.

Little Hood Mountain was rich with Unx, that black stone-like wood beneath the ground, so valuable and warm when ignited. Little Hood Mountain had for as long as anyone remembered been sacred to Mir, and untouched by man. It was so no longer. Fhyrr's own crack Delta Guards surrounded the hilltop and all the valley below. Commanded by Sirius Jones, that teetotaling oak-armed hero whose love for his troops was satirized in the ribald ballads of anonymous bards, the 5,000 homosexual warriors were the core of Fhyrr's power. At this moment they were all that kept the mercenaries in check. Fhyrr was very aware that behind him the tropical descent to Mir's Delta, only forty trollbanners away, was entirely undefended. If the invasion of Aiirste did not begin now in earnest, there might well be trouble.

Bare was the rising breadth of Mir whose vista the King now surveyed. The few surrounding villages and farms had been looted and sacked. Local populations of wild pigs, rabbits and so-called bats of infinity were long barbecued and devoured. Thin gruel, grainwine and uncultured hod had provoked mad riot dancing between the various mercenary companies and their prostitutes. The fragrant forest that once stretched over all the Veldt up along the Horgalian Road to Aiirste was no more. The 8,000 Karg, fearsome though they were in battle, were vegetarians. They had shaved the grass from the ground with their multiple jaws and now had to be flown far and wide to feed.

The luxurious shaffron tents curled open so that the smoldering panorama of the King's power lay open before him. Red with flame, black with smoke, loud with violence and abandon, it was a scene, young Fhyrr thought, of the most delectable and sublime potency. Fhyrr enjoyed war. He planned on continuing it indefinitely. War gave him freedom from the restrictions of courtly life in Schloss Syste, where his mother and sisters were always interfering.

Only at war did Fhyrr feel free to pursue his peculiar originality. This evening, for instance, he'd had four slaves fixed to high poles around the pool. They were writhing while other slaves stimulated them with specially designed magical objects. Such continual passions Fhyrr considered a magical and inspiring background to affairs of state. The mercenaries appreciated his extremity, he knew. And, forsooth, he feared them not. Fhyrr was invincible, a veritable god. It was written the LXIII of his line could only be killed by a King; and in a land still degraded by unnatural women, Fhyrr was the only King far and wide. He gestured to the shadows and called forward the visitor who had been prostrated awaiting his indulgence.

"Grynthe! Rise Up!"

Out of the shadows, strange in the firelight, stood a small, bent man of great age. He wore a black robe, with its hood pulled back. The firelight revealed dark Southern features, lined with age, experience and some other quality that was neither joy nor horror. Still undefined after so many years, it twitched in his black and shining eyes, burning to express itself as one or the other. The black robe was of urualal, generating that peculiar color-field associated with magic and worldly success. Various rings and oddities adorned the long-nailed fingers emerging from his enrobed arms.

His sharp white beard sparkled with precious dust.

"The sellswords are hungry. We must unleash them and invade. I can wait no longer."

Grynthe bowed facetiously. "All is ready," he purred in a foreign accent. "I only await the return of my agent. I expect him tomorrow."

"If he is not here tomorrow, we move without him. That Stranger repels me. I don't know why you trusted him in the first place." Fhyrr disliked Grynthe as well, a wizard of insinuating ambition. Once Mellynthe had fallen, he planned to feed the old man live to the Great Squid.

"No ordinary hero could penetrate Mellynthe."

"He believes himself clever. I do not trust him."

"He is beholden to return to me with a piece of the Great Squid. When it is in my hands, we can be assured the Squid will not interfere. *Then* I shall send a gift down the shaft I have bored into the sacred veins of blood beneath. I shall unleash them. Borne on underground Ingrit who reaches all the way to Aiirste, inside the walls of Mellynthe itself, we will ignite their river and all their water-works just as the mercenaries assault the Iron Gate. Once Mellynthe has fallen, all Aiirste and beyond will be open for pillage and conquest."

"But you must preserve Devonie, damn you. I *will* have Devonie. I *will* have all her women." It was one of the last things that aroused the King, this thought of these free women used to commanding men. His boys, beasts, his ranks of maids, mothers and crones – he would sacrifice them all on the instant to rape the Queen of Mellynthe personally, her servants, nobles, staff and surviving populace. His cruelty would be particularly inventive with such a cast. He would soak her patterns and linens with blood, excrement and seed. The changes in the South, where men had claimed that the Gods were dead, called for great works. The smallfolk needed to be impressed. The new idea that Mir could be taken and put to the will of man had transformed Fhyrr into an agent of historical change. He himself was history, the literal end of eras.

Grynthe nodded eagerly. "I have prepared, Sire. Old Hemme, the Queen's First Minister, will help us preserve Devonie. She will have no choice. The Grennen I sent to poison Hemme's body succeeded. I have her soul here." That unnamable quality emerged suddenly in the expressive face. Was it revealed joy? Grynthe's lips dipped into a snake-like V to share the insane and most serious fact of what he had accomplished. He held forward a glittering scraffrat. Wrapped in a linen cloth so as not to sear his fingers, its light flashed out silver and blue. For Fhyrr half the world was temporarily blanked in hard darkness.

The King rose naked and furious from the pool. "Get it away, Fool!" Grynthe bowed low and retreated into the shadows.

Fhyrr waited for his vision to return to normal. Presently, inhaling a pipeful of skod, the King closed his eyes again. Though he could still see the halo of the light, the trickling water sounds and the groans of the strung-up slaves joined together in a singly body of sound around him. Against this shimmering radiance, as if it were a reflection upon a surface of deeper sounds, a little voice was audible, lightly riding their waves.

"Did somebody say Fool?"

"My Fool," Fhyrr groaned, opening his eyes, exhaling pungent skod. "Where is my Fool?"

"Look to your mirror," tripped the velvety voice as small as a lover's golden chain, but male and crafty as well. *"Great King."*

Fhyrr raised a glass. Through his own well-bred, decadent features, rippling reflected against the reds and pinks and hard magenta of Delta heraldry, it may have been possible to detect a quick fellow with a curling yellow beard removing his jaunty cap and bowing obsequiously low to the ground. A littler man even than Grynthe, in motley and frond even more peculiarly attired.

"There you are, Oroglio. You heard what transpired?"

"Yes, your Masters. We overheard."

"When this Stranger arrives," Fhyrr said. "You must help me. I will not trust that Wizard when he has the Squid in his hands. You must play one of your tricks."

"And if we do so shall we be free, Masters?"

"If you do not do so you shall never be free, Fool."

"A trick's a treat for us, your Masters. A trick's a treat for us."

But the King, under the influence of the skod, was again looking at himself. How profoundly deep were his own black eyes. Where was the Fool now? Up in the heights of the tent? Even Fhyrr, who could only suffer Oroglio's impudence when under the mellowing influence of the skod, was never quite sure the creature existed...

◆

Later that same night, two days ride North along the Horgalian Road to Aiirste, a screaming came lupine high and shrill across the sky. It domed the great night's silence below it, and was answered by other wolves from beyond. What appeared on first glance to be two itinerant Oan priests, robed and black, rode horses south along the yellow road in the direction of Mir's Delta. Peculiarly, they had not encountered a single traveler, bandit, merchant, would-be hero or prostitute since leaving Aiirste two nights before.

It was of course clear to all in Mellynthe and those upon the battlements as well just who was slipping out of the kingdom in disguise that night. Rumors had already reached the Kingdom of a great army assembling to the South. King Fhyrr was on the move, hoping to place all of Mir under the domination of Mitra and his Southern fashions. There were reports that Grennen had already attempted penetration of the Labyrinth. What could Starlite and the Stranger (for it was obviously they) hope to accomplish outside the Iron Gate? What was silver-haired Hemme planning by sending them? Surely their place was in the Kingdom, in the front lines of the coming fight. Bets were placed. Odds were in favor of the idea that the Stranger was an ambassador from Fhyrr, that the latter had made demands, and that Starlite had been sent to issue reply. But if so, why the secrecy and disguise?

We of course had not properly assessed the danger. For without a secret weapon, certainly, an army as large as any that could actually fit in the narrow veldt before the Iron Gate would have a hard time causing much damage. The Squid, by long arrangement with the Oan Temple, assured the defense of the subterranean rivers and tunnels.

As would only become apparent at a much later date, Starlite and the mighty Stranger had adopted these disguises for the penetration of King Fhyrr's court and the assassination of Grynthe the wizard. The Stranger, three deeds away from being coronated king of Aiirste, was instructed to keep Starlite safe. And Starlite, by secret instruction from the Queen was pledged to kill him when it was all over. Queen Devonie, meanwhile, returned to her weaving for the Maypole celebrations were not two months away.

The Stranger (or “The Pretender,” as Starlite had started thinking of him, so as to develop a necessary dislike) rode ahead, silent and sullen. He sat back on his steed as if it were a sedan. From time to time he would pull bridle and the horse would snort to a halt. Black hair swept behind his ears, his own great nostrils sniffing – he was more beast than the animal he rode. Starlite might not have been there at all. His disinterest bothered her, she realized. Though he was now robed, she could still see his spectacular torso in her mind’s eye. Every scar on his chest and back, every straining vein in his broad and cruel muscles told a story of steel and mayhem. The two rings on his hand showed such workmanship as she had never beheld; the odd fact of his blue eyes – unknown in a male in all the Reach – told even stranger sorts of narrations. Yet she herself had rid him of a finger! These heroes were after all not so fearsome, she laughed behind him.

Even now the Stranger showed signs of a man who believed himself able to understand women. How easily, and with what grace the Queen had handled him. Starlite thrilled to remember Devonie’s quiet courage in the face of the sudden catastrophe. Devonie’s awarding the would-be King three tasks had been an invention, Starlite knew. Hemme had not been there to advise, and Devonie had improvised. She placed the kingdom in Starlite’s hands and told a tale, in order to be left to return to her work. The linen would be floated all across Mir during the coming festival, and it would be Starlite’s own doing as much as anybody else’s. For Starlite, in her Queen’s own telling, not the Stranger, was the hero of this tale. Hemme would say heroine, but Starlite would doubtless prefer the male form, Hero, as it was closer to the original root of the word.[1] Or so this scribe had claimed mirrors ago when she was instructed to his literary tutelage. The impatient scribe had one day warned Starlite of the dangers of a hero’s life. But Starlite was always only interested in the happiest reapings in the bounty around her, and he regretted his words immediately.

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[1] *Hero* derives from the Viccan *Haigh-hoigh*, the cry of faeries when coming upon any human being (male or female) whom another faerie has blessed or cursed. The cry flips a curse to a blessing and vice versa.

She punished him with disinterest for the rest of the afternoon.

It was a policy of Aiirste that children instructed one another. Only by teaching, she argued, could one learn. Hardly older than Starlite by a movement of the hay, her tutor might have hoped to have taught Starlite far more than he himself had learned. He had only recently come to understand human sexuality in all its perverse details, for instance. This discovery made many previous poetic mysteries depressingly obvious. He only hoped Phellyste had trained Starlite well in the arts of war, for it was now left to this maid of just 221 turns of the Major Mirror to enter the Great world alone…

✧

The Pretender thought Starlite a child, she saw. Her presence in his mission he found the capstone of a pyramid of grim absurdities. She had already saved his life once. She might not even need to kill him herself. The Stranger was so bull-headed that she doubted (in fact hoped very much) she would be forced to do no more than fail to intervene in a suicidal frontal assault.

Yet all his scars showed he had survived before. Could the hero take the loss of his finger so lightly? How old was he? Perhaps his pride was injured. After his extraordinary successful bid to become King of Mellynthe by touching the stone in Devonie's belly, the episode with the Grennen must have been something of a come-down. As Starlite and the Stranger pursued the Grennen through the Labyrinth, he had insisted on leading the way. Not being able to understand the trickery of the mirrors and lanes, he made a wrong turn. Our Starlite did not. While she made quick work of fourteen head of the poisonous frog-torsoed Grennen with blow-darts, the Stranger ran face first into a tentacle of the Great Squid. He was still battling when she found him. Amazingly he had wounded the invulnerable being, managing to cut a finger length tip off this minor tentacle. When Starlite found him, the Squid's acidic puss now covered the floor two feet deep and had burned the sandals and the leggings off his ankles. Starlite whistled and held up the string of Grennen teeth she'd taken. The Pretender would not otherwise have abandoned and survived the Battle with the Squid.

Again the wolf cried long and wild across the black sky. Starlite worried to hear it. Her new knowledge concerning the real state of the lights in the black sky only deepened the emptiness of which the wolf sung. Hemme had taught all the girls of the court how to run with wolves. But as if she knew how Starlite felt about the creatures, indeed all creatures of the wild Steppes and hill countries, Hemme had always limited her time with the animals.

Presently, as Starlite crested the rise and saw the long road stretching through the nightsoaked wilderness, the Pretender was nowhere in sight. Did he hope to abandon her? So as to perform his task alone? Starlite chuckled, shook her head at the bull-headedness of men. She removed her black robe. Whatever the Mirrors in the sky were not, they were reflections of distant days. She bathed her nakedness in their influence and attention. This influence excited and strengthened her as she leapt from the horse Silem and crouched, as one must do when one means to commune with wolves. Stringing her pack and her weapons about her, Starlite gave Silem instruction. Becoming night then, she scented her signals to the wolves, passing water upon the smiling root of a tree. After, not even Devonie could have seen her as she ran barefoot and free...

✧

The wolves found the Pretender at the edge of a crag rising North over the valley ending before Little Hood Mountain. Starlite only glimpsed at the mad spectacle splayed out before her as she ran along the ridge, of armies and fires and the distant tip of the sacred promontory whereon the King's tents gleamed with flame and unholy, writhing colors. Such a host had never before been seen in that land and she wondered at the shocking danger that Devonie's kingdom was facing.

Bathing in a hot-spring pool in a denuded glade, the Pretender, when she found him, was as naked as she. More, considering the weapons slung about her. He had a fire going, and a dead rat ready for eating. His sword was not upon him. Starlite stayed concealed behind a stump-bush of fragrant rosemarine the plunderers had not thought to pluck and observed him from behind in the glittering darkness. His shoulders stretched so wide that the wet raven locks were splayed down his back like an open fan. Muscles contoured his scarred spine as he shook his mane. His tight buttocks curled smooth like white ivory porpoise-heads. His thighs roped and buckled as he squatted and stretched, preparing for the morning's action. She saw his sex! No longer the small protrusion that made the width of his belly and thighs absurd, it hung low below his ballocks like a child's forearm.

Starlite's laughter, taunting and clear on the night, startled him around – he bellowed and leapt for his sword.

"I have your sword, Stranger," said the still invisible Knight fourth degree of the Garter, trained well in the throwing of voice. "Tell me why you thought to abandon me or you shall not have it back."

"Crom! Wench, I will spank you for this –"

He darted forward but where he thought the maid to be he discovered a wolf, grinning before him, her long nose touching the ground, tail erect and tense.

Starlite remembered his reaction to brave Xernth and Bucksmoth, the Lords of Mellynthe's Southern kennels. The Stranger feared wolves and Dogs. "What magic is this?" he whispered, standing back.

"There are three more of my sisters watching you," Starlite said. "I'm surprised you didn't smell them. Have you been drinking?" For she now saw a gourd of hod discarded on the ground.

He hissed through grit teeth. "Give me my sword or I will rip your sisters into meat, and sling you on the back of my horse with my bare hands."

"In that case why do you need your sword?"

"Reveal yourself."

"First tell me why you thought to abandon me."

"I have no need of your services."

"Do you not wish to be King? Queen Devonie –"

"Curse on you witches all! I am not interested in being ruled by your Queen whatever title she gives me." He belched loudly, with heroic volume. "My business is with Fhyrr. Fhyrr alone. You women be damned." He grabbed for the gourd, which was apparently not empty, and unpopped its trex.

"Do you mean to say you don't mean to be King of Aiirse?" Starlite pressed. "Are you afraid to do what the Queen commands? Or do you mean to join King Fhyrr and destroy Aiirste with what you've learned about the Kingdom?"

He drank deep then crouched, scowling, great hands protecting his sex, now quivering and erect, she saw, its foreskin cut to reveal a proud curling helmet.

"It seems you don't despise us as much you pretend," she laughed.

"Crom. There are such things as wind-witches who play with a man after bathing."

"Do you not mean to slay Grynthe? It was the Queen's command."

"Where is my horse and pack?"

"Will you swear not to abandon me? Take me along on your quest to Fhyrr's court. I don't need you to help with Grynthe."

He laughed. "What do I care? Everyone must die some day. You may ride with me if you insist."

She pushed his pack and sword out to him, surprising him greatly by her closeness to his person. He leapt in the air like a panther, tripping over the gourd on his landing. She stood back, blades unsheathed and laughed at his bouncing disorder. He covered himself and Starlite stepped back, keeping him in her clever eye. Squatting (to the advantage of his oaken thighs, she thought) he opened and rummaged.

Presently they sat before the fire. Starlite gave her portion of the rat to the wolves. The Stranger now wore a loin-cloth, a leathern belt, buckled in bronze. What looked to be a shirt of Horgalian ring mail came down to his navel. Across his brow a silver band functioned something like a helmet and hand-clasp. "We will be presented to the King," he told her. "Grynthe will be there as well. Do not, under any circumstances, speak or act unless I instruct you. I mean to kill Fhyrr. When I strike, the battle begins. I may strike at any time. Try not to risk yourself unnecessarily. After Fhyrr is done, I will come for Grynthe, if I can. Do you understand?" He ripped the dead rat's meaty thighs with his huge teeth and then spat it out, disgusted.

"Of course I understand," said Starlite. "How do you intend on gaining the King's presence?"

He held up his mutilated hand, displaying a mulliner's sphere ring upon it. An image of a lizard-headed male fertility demon hung in the air not a nail's breadth above the sphere. "Most soldiers know who I am. For anyone else, this ring gives pass directly to the Wizard. He knows me well."

"How will you explain my presence?"

The Stranger tossed the rat to the wolf. "I will think of something. I always do."

He bent his surprisingly slender waist to open again his pouch. The wolf growled and rose to approach, newly curious. "Yes, what is that delicious smell," Starlite said, sniffing the air.

Surprising her yet again, the stranger raised a new gourd of hod high to the Mirrors of Mir. "It is a mad, mad, mad, mad world, wench. It may kill us on the morrow." He unwrapped the yellow cloth and tossed the curling lump of flesh it contained upon the fire-stone. It sizzled and flashed, and rich fragrant smoke poured off of it.

"Is that? –"

"I once sailed with pirates in a region where kalimar is eaten raw. But a simple grilling is the easier way."

"Stranger," observed Starlite. "It appears to me you are considering eating of the flesh of the Great Squid."

"I am hungry and the sun is rising." He pinioned the rubbery finger with his sword, and flipped the fragrant curl out upon a stone. "Come, did you not see for yourself the truth of the world when you gazed through the machine? There are no such things as gods." His teeth ripped at the flesh. Surprisingly it was tender and soft, and apparently lip-smackingly delicious. He drank deep of his grog to swallow it down and belched loudly in satisfaction.

"Why did you bring the machine to Aiirste to begin with?"

"I needed something to get me inside. And it was true many years ago, Calc of Everline did give me that machine and told me if I was near Mellynthe it might well gain me access there. He knew Devonie's crone of old. He hoped to get her eye to the machine. I thought it might get me close to the Queen. It did."

"Why did Calc wish Hemme to see that Iapellus in the sky is not really a flashing brocade, but a round world of color apparently surrounded by numerous small 'Mirrors' like Mir's own?"

"Hemme rejected his advances long ago. He wished to play a trick on her in revenge."

"I would know still more," said Starlite. "We are soon to face our deaths and I prefer not to do so in ignorance. Why did Grynthe send you to Mellynthe?"

"The wizard knows of my feelings for Fhyrr." The Stranger could not utter the King's name without flashing thunder from his brow. He drew his great blade with impatience. “I was to bring him a piece of the Great Squid of Mellynthe, just the merest tip of a tentacle and he was to give me the King. Fhyrr is of no use to the wizard once the invasion is launched and Mellynthe doomed. Which it shall be tomorrow no doubt, or so he thinks, for with this piece of the tentacle,” he gestured to the yellow greasy cloth – there was something inside of it – “he can entrap the entire Squid in his scraffrat long enough to set fire to Mellynthe from below.”

She met his blue gaze. “You have eaten the Squid,” she said. It thrilled her, the sudden remembrance that they were in great danger.

“True. Because I no longer need it to get to the King.”

“Why not?”

He laughed. “Because I have you.”

The fact was Starlite had misunderstood the Stranger and his motives. He did not want to be king at all, but only craved revenge. Why had he come to the kingdom at all? She wondered what Fhyrr had done to him to earn such resolve. She liked the Pretender. Even now, snoring on the grass beneath his horse, while she spat out what remained of the strange-tasting flesh of the Squid, he cut a happy almost comical figure. She wanted even to protect him. Such an animal should do nothing but survive, Starlite thought, stroking the wolf’s coat as she licked the oils of the squid from Starlite’s fingers.

It would be easy at such a moment to kill the Pretender. But it would be dismaying as well. In fact it came upon her suddenly with a swiftness as sharp as a dart, that she would not do it. She could certainly. But she would not. She could not even, alas, hope for his accidental death. This resolve, or anti-resolve, she knew, if he were not to die accidentally would effectively banish her from Mellynthe.

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When she awoke, some time after dawn, the Stranger’s sword was cold against her forehead. The wolves were gone.

“All your hair must be shorn, wench.”

“Why must my head be shaved?” She could only imagine Hemme’s reaction.

“You will be my captive. It’s how Fhyrr believes Devonie keeps her court.”

hung slung over her shoulder, strung between her small tear-shaped breasts.

The stranger brandished his great blade, and rode his horse aggressively to push away the curious and inflamed. "She is for the King!" Rotten fruit and human filth was cast upon her. Buttocks and genitals were displayed. She was spat upon. The commotion and violence inspired by this rare sight of a female warrior of Airste forced the Stranger indeed to kill at least two of the number before they came to the guard-house at the foot of Little Hood Mountain. Here the guards he encountered needed not to see his ring to award him their service. They knew him by sight.

He dismounted and pulled her roughly from the horse by a rope. Starlite fell rolling, easily making light of the tumble. He led her to a mudwalled hut with skins hung across its roof, that served as station-house for the Delta Guard commanding the hill and its environs. After a visit to the privyhole, the Stranger took Starlite into the arms room.

He grinned, not at all worried about the coming action, sharpening his blade upon the station wheel. Starlite asked if they might speak openly. "What do you want to know?" She asked about the magic nipple-plates and thong and wristbands she now wore.

"They were intended for another," he growled. "Now they are yours. Such is the way of the world. If we survive you can keep them."

"So you've involved this infidel in your schemes to kill the King?" A small and evil male, Starlite saw, had entered the room. "Where is it? Do you have it? Let me see it! I smell it!" How long had he been there? He was smaller even than Hemme, gristled with great age. He had the attitude of one who was paying greater attention to another set of events than those at hand. His glittering eyes, so near to his great prize, slid to take Starlite in view only in retrospect. He lifted a crystal and viewed her through it, so that to her, his eye appeared upside-down and inside-out.

"This creature will only inflame the King to immediate lust."

"That is indeed the plan."

"First, however – the Squid. The King has already launched the invasion –"

But the wizard was interrupted by a soldier, a bear-like hero, broader of shoulder and arm even than the Stranger himself. He wore a steel skull-cap, black leather chaps and breast-work, belts and straps spiked with iron. He bore an enormous ball headed spiked mace to match. His great black beard was wove into two triangles and bleached Mir's Delta red, white and pink.

"The King will see you all," he said. "At once."

As the Pretender rudely yanked his prisoner to her feet (so that Starlite had to draw upon all her dexterity not to twist an ankle or bang a knee), the wizard Grynthe made a sound – a peculiar whistling hoot, if it may be so named. Starlite remembered afterwards as equal parts cry of joy and scream of horror. The wizard had seen her backside, and the peculiar birth-mark it showed, a print of what for all intents and purposes appeared to be the slithery mind of a Squid.

"Oh indeed," whispered Grynthe to himself, trembling. "This is more than you reasoned upon. There on that slut's backside see the mark of the future, which shall produce such imprintings on our memories that we seem to experience them in the present itself even as it occurs in the past. Such visions of the Squid should come upon one after feasting upon its flesh, not before. But clearly this moment is already lost to us. Let Sirius Jones do away with the Stranger. Ah, but you smell its sweetness, old friend. That smell will penetrate the core of Great Grynthe, old old friend. In the future it has! Indeed this moment like any other moment is already –"

"Wizard!"

Grynthe leapt back, startled out of his reverie. It was Jones, peering through the opening of the mud-walled station. The others were already outside.

"You too."

"Yes yes," Grynthe said. "But do not harm the Stranger! He holds the Squid! I smell it now!"

To Be Continued...